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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [GR](#)

SUBJECT: POWER BLACKOUTS AND TRASH-STREWN STREETS --
STRIKES AGAINST PENSION REFORM CONTINUE

REF: ATHENS 00353

¶1. (U) Rolling electrical blackouts and burgeoning trash piles persist across Greece as unions extend and intensify strikes against social security and pension reform (reftel). The Karamanlis government's social security/pension reform bill is now scheduled for vote in Parliament on Thursday, March 20. The government asserts that this reform is necessary to address long-term deficiencies in Greece's social security and pension system, pointing to economic predictions that the current system will no longer be solvent within the next 10 years. Labor unions remain opposed to any reduction in social security or pension benefits. The government's bill would raise retirement age for some (the retirement age for women will be raised to 65 from 60 and of working mothers to 55 from 50, starting in 2009), and reduce benefits for others. Greece's opposition parties have all expressed opposition to the bill. Although the Government only has a one-vote majority in Parliament, we see little indication that any ruling New Democracy MPs will break government ranks and vote against the bill.

¶2. (U) In anticipation of the Parliamentary vote, Greece's labor unions have called a third nationwide general strike for Wednesday, March 19; it is expected to paralyze the country. Doctors, journalists, engineers, bakers, gas station employees, teachers and pharmacists will all participate. Lawyers have said they will strike the entire week. Private bank workers began striking March 17.

¶3. (U) The General Confederation of Greek Workers, which represents 2.5 million union members, staged a three-hour work stoppage March 12. Athens Metro and electric train workers held a 24-hour strike March 13, leading to massive traffic congestion in Athens. Another transportation strike in Athens has been called for Tuesday, March 18, in addition to the general strike on Wednesday.

¶4. (U) While power sector workers and Central Bank employees continue to strike for a third week, sanitation workers went back to work on Monday, March 17, after receiving some concessions from the government. When members of other labor unions attempted to stop them from depositing trash into the Athens landfill, riot police had to be deployed to provide sanitation workers with access to the landfill. Local press suggest that it will take two weeks to remove all the trash that has built up on the sidewalks during the sanitation strike.
SPECKHARD